



## 3 ADOPTING A WAITING CHILD



Project Family  
103 S. Main Street  
3rd Floor, Osgood Bldg.  
Waterbury, VT 05671-2401  
802-241-2780 in Waterbury  
1-800-746-7000 toll-free  
in Vermont  
[www.projectfamilyvt.org](http://www.projectfamilyvt.org)



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## ADOPTING A WAITING CHILD

### Did You Know That...?

- On any given day in Vermont, there are about 100 children waiting in foster care for families to adopt them.
- You can provide one of these children a safe home, a loving family, and a chance for a new life.
- You don't have to be rich or married to adopt.
- There is a lot of support available when you adopt a waiting child.

### About Foster Care

Sometimes children are abused or neglected and it is not safe for them to stay at home. When this happens, family courts transfer their custody to the Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF).

Some children, but most often teens, come into DCF custody because they've either committed a delinquent act or they are without or beyond their parents' control.

In all of these situations, the state needs to find safe, nurturing places for the children to live while they can't be at home. This is called *foster care*. While it is not a magical cure-all, it is a time-proven way of helping children and families in need.

The majority of children in foster care return home to their parents; however, when children cannot safely go home, their parents' legal rights are terminated and the children are freed for adoption. In Vermont, most children who become freed for adoption are adopted by their foster parents. Sometimes foster parents are unable to adopt and new families need to be found.

### Adopting A Waiting Child

Most of the waiting children are school-aged and many have special needs related to the abuse or neglect they've experienced. Some are part of a group of siblings who would like to stay together. What they all have in common is the desire to belong. They all want a place to go for the holidays, someone to share good news with or ask for advice, and people they can depend on. They want families.

Adoptive parents offer the waiting children:

- A sense of belonging.
- A place to call home.
- People who love them unconditionally.

Share your home and heart with a waiting child.  
Become an adoptive parent!

“WE FEEL THAT GIVING A CHILD A FAMILY-ORIENTED HOME WITH LOVE AND SUPPORT IS FULFILLING TO OUR SOULS. TO SEE THEM SMILE, TO HEAR THEM SAY ‘I LOVE YOU’ AND ‘THANK YOU,’ TO BE THERE TO TALK AND LISTEN, JUST TO SHARE EVERYTHING IS VERY REWARDING.”

### Who Can Apply

- You must be at least 21 years old.
- You can be single, married, living with a partner, or joined through a civil union.
- You can live in a house or apartment, but must have enough room to house a child.
- You must have sufficient income to support your family.
- Applications are considered regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.

### Who We Are Looking For

The waiting children are all different; they each have their own unique needs, desires, and interests. Adoptive parents are also different. They come from all walks of life, with diverse life experiences, levels of education, income levels, occupations, and lifestyles. Some have experience with children, while others are willing to learn.

Successful adoptive parents do, however, have some traits in common:

- The desire to help a child.
- The self-assurance to ask for help when they need it.
- The ability to provide direction and structure in a nurturing way.
- The ability to recognize and celebrate small successes.
- The willingness to stick by a child through difficult behaviors and situations.
- The capacity to learn and grow.
- Compassion, patience, tolerance, strength of character, and a sense of humor.
- Support from family, friends, and members of their community.



# 10 STEPS TO ADOPTING A CHILD

The main steps are described below in the order that they *usually* happen. Keep in mind that these steps can sometimes happen in a different order, and that some steps can happen concurrently.

## STEP 1. Make The Decision To Adopt

Adopting a waiting child will affect every aspect of your life. Because it is such a big commitment, one that will affect all members of your household, everyone in your home needs to think about what it will mean to them and what adjustments they may have to make. It is a decision for the entire family.

Below is a list of questions that can help you make the right decision for your family.

- Does everyone in our family support our decision to adopt? What about extended family members? Close friends?
- Are we ready for a change in our lives, routines, and future plans?
- With what children can we be most successful? Does age or gender matter?
- Can we parent a child who may have been sexually abused, physically abused, and/or neglected?
- Can we parent a child who has physical, emotional, mental, and/or behavioral challenges?
- Are there behaviors or special needs we feel unable or unwilling to handle at this time?
- How much supervision can we provide?
- Are we open to having any type of ongoing contact with a child's parents?
- Do we have the space in our home for a child?
- Do we have the financial resources to properly care for our family?
- What else do we need to be successful? Is that help available?
- What resources are available in our community?

## STEP 2. Register With Or Apply To Project Family

### A. Register Your Homestudy or Foster Care License with Project Family.

If you have a current, approved adoption homestudy or foster care license from the state of Vermont, you can register with Project Family by:

- Completing the registration form (available by calling 1-800-746-7000 or on the web at [www.projectfamilyvt.org](http://www.projectfamilyvt.org)).
- Mailing us your completed form, along with a copy of your homestudy OR a letter from the licensing agency confirming the status of your foster care license.

If you are a licensed foster parent, please advise your local resource coordinator that you registered with Project Family to adopt a waiting child.

Once you are registered with Project Family, proceed to Step 3.

## OR

### B. Apply to Have an Adoption Homestudy Completed.

If you live in Vermont, you can apply to have Project Family complete your homestudy at no up-front cost to you. The homestudy will remain our property and be restricted to the adoption of a child in Vermont foster care. If you live out of state, you must have a homestudy completed by a child-placing agency in your state and then register your homestudy with Project Family.

You can apply by:

- Completing the application form (available by calling 1-800-746-7000 or on the web at [www.projectfamilyvt.org](http://www.projectfamilyvt.org)).
- Mailing us your completed form.

“SOME OF LIFE’S GREATEST TREASURES COME WRAPPED IN LAYERS. IT MAY TAKE YEARS TO UNDO, BUT IT’S WORTH IT.”

An adoption homestudy evaluates the appropriateness of your family as an adoptive placement. With very few exceptions, you must have one completed before a child can be placed with you for the purpose of adoption. The process will help you learn more about yourselves and the kind of child you can best parent. It will also provide us with the information we need to make the best possible match for your family and provide the court with much of the information needed to legally finalize an adoption.

The evaluation process, the contents of the written report, and the time it takes to complete varies from state to state and agency to agency; however, it typically takes 3 to 4 months to complete and requires the following:

- Several meetings between your family and an adoption social worker, including at least 1 home visit and 2 face-to-face interviews.
- Certified copies of documents such as birth certificates, marriage licenses, civil union certificates, divorce decrees, and dissolution of civil union decrees.
- Medical health statements for each applicant.
- A financial statement and most recent tax return.
- Background checks including, but not limited to, any criminal history, child abuse or neglect substantiations, past-due child support payments, motor vehicle violations, and past or current Restraining/Relief from Abuse orders.
- 5 references.

At the end of the process, the social worker reports his or her findings and recommendations in a written document called the *adoption homestudy*.

This is a good time to start working on your adoptive parent profile — a document that tells your family's story in a creative way. Your profile will be given to a child whom you've been matched with before your first meeting. That way, he or she can get to know a little bit about you before that first face-to-face meeting, which can be scary. You can tell your story any way you choose. Many parents tell their stories in a scrapbook using some narrative and lots of photographs. You might, for example, want to include photographs of you, your extended family members, your home and community, any pets, the school the child will attend, and the child's room.

## STEP 3. Attend Training

Our training program is designed to help you gain the knowledge and skills you'll need to successfully parent a child who has been abused or neglected. It covers topics such as understanding the effect abuse and neglect can have on children, dealing with abuse-related behaviors, parenting adopted children, attachment and adoption, and the resources available to adoptive families.

Attending training will also give you the opportunity to connect with other families who are also going through the process of adopting a child in foster care.

## STEP 4. Wait For A Match

Once your homestudy is completed and approved, we can consider your family as a possible match for a waiting child. How soon a match is made will largely depend on how flexible you are in terms of the age, gender, and special needs of the children you will accept.

You can also search our list of waiting children ([www.projectfamilyvt.org](http://www.projectfamilyvt.org)). If a child captures your interest, contact that child's worker to let them know.

Keep in mind that our goal is to select the family we believe can best meet a particular child's needs.

## STEP 5. Get To Know The Child

When a worker decides that you are a good match for a child, he or she will provide you with more detailed information, including the child's medical history, school records, and professional assessments. You will get to read the child's file and speak with people who work or live with the child (e.g. foster parents, teachers, and therapists).

Once you and the child's worker decide the match is appropriate, the worker will give the child your adoptive parent profile and arrange for you to begin visits.

“EACH CHILD HAS A SPECIAL SPOT WORTH REACHING, A POTENTIAL WORTH FULFILLING, A SPIRIT TO FIGHT FOR, AND LOVE WAITING TO BE GIVEN. THE EXPERIENCE IS TO BE TREASURED.”

## STEP 6. Transition The Child Into Your Home

You and your worker will meet with the child's team to develop a plan to transition the child into your home. You will discuss several issues: *When and where will the initial visit take place? How long will the transition period last? How many visits are needed? How will we prepare the child? What services need to be in place before the child moves in?*

Visits typically start as short meetings, increasing in length as you get to know each other. They can go on for weeks or even months before the child moves in with you.

## STEP 7. Sign An Intent To Adopt

Before the child moves into your home, your adoption social worker will ask you to sign a *Statement of Intent to Adopt*, which spells out your commitment to adopt this child.

You and your worker should begin discussing the adoption assistance that might be available to your child. Adoption assistance is a subsidy program for people who adopt children with special needs. It can include monthly payments, medical benefits, reimbursement of one-time adoption expenses, and services such as subsidized childcare. You must apply for, negotiate, and sign an adoption assistance agreement before the adoption is completed and in some cases, before the child moves into your home.

## STEP 8. Welcome The Child Into Your Home

Vermont law requires that the child live with you for at least 6 months before an adoption can become legal. Your worker will stay in close contact with you during this period to see how you are doing and to start working towards finalizing the adoption.

Your worker will also help you to complete and file the adoption petition, which must be filed in probate court within 45 days after your child moves in.

## STEP 9. Legally Finalize The Adoption

Finalization is the last formal step in the adoption process and marks the official beginning of your new family. Your worker will help you to complete and gather the paperwork necessary to legally finalize the adoption, file it in court on your behalf, and schedule the finalization hearing, which usually lasts from 10 to 30 minutes. As soon as the judge signs the adoption order, you will have permanent legal custody of your child.

## STEP 10. Access Post-Adoption Services If And When You Need Them

There may be times when you will need help after the adoption has been finalized. Ask your adoption social worker about the post-adoption services that might be available to your family if and when you need them. Post-adoption services can include parenting support, respite services, advocacy, case management, help with school and community issues, support and discussion groups, educational resources, and intensive supports.

Asking for support is a sign of strength, not weakness. The most successful adoptive families are those who seek out support from the start.



“MANY PEOPLE THINK OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS WHEN THEY THINK OF ADOPTING. TEENS ALSO HUNGER FOR A FAMILY. THEY ARE STILL DEVELOPING. IT’S AN IMPORTANT TIME IN THEIR LIVES. THEY NEED THAT SENSE OF BELONGING TO SOMEONE AND A PLACE TO CALL HOME. THEY MAY ONLY BE TEENS FOR A FEW MORE YEARS, BUT THEY WILL BE YOUR CHILD FOR A LIFETIME.”

### The Cost

There is no fee to adopt a child in Vermont foster care. What's more, when you adopt a waiting child, Project Family will provide adoption services at no cost to you. This includes pre-adoption counseling, child and family matching, finalization services, post-placement visits, and post-adoption counseling.

### The Support Available

#### Financial Support

- Most of the waiting children are eligible to receive an adoption subsidy — a monthly payment to help you meet the child’s special needs — until age 18. The child’s age and special needs as well as your family’s financial circumstances will be considered when determining any amount you might receive.
- The Department may reimburse you, or pay a third party directly, up to \$2,000 for expenses directly related to completing the adoption.
- You may be eligible to claim a federal tax credit when you adopt a child with special needs, regardless of your actual expenses.

#### Childcare

Some of the waiting children qualify for subsidized childcare if the parents work outside the home. It may also be authorized because of the child’s special needs.

#### Medical Benefits

Most of the waiting children qualify for medical benefits through Vermont Medicaid, which helps to cover the cost of doctor’s visits, prescriptions, hospital care, mental health services, dental care, eye care, occupational therapy, speech therapy, and more. If you live or move out of state, medical benefits may or may not be provided by the other state.

“DESPITE THE CHALLENGES POSED BY BOTH THE CHILD AND THE SYSTEM, THE REWARD OF SEEING A CHILD BLOSSOM AND GROW IS PRICELESS.”

### Ongoing Support

Adoptive families in Vermont are fortunate to have quality post-adoption resources available to them:

- **The Vermont Adoption Consortium** is a statewide network of agencies that offer post-adoption services to all adoptive families in Vermont. These services can include information and referral, training opportunities, advocacy, help with school and community issues, support and discussion groups, educational resources, respite services, counseling, and intensive supports.
- **The Vermont Foster/Adoptive Family Association (VFAFA)** is a grassroots network of foster and adoptive parents throughout Vermont. Membership benefits include annual conferences, a newsletter, ongoing training and networking opportunities, and peer support.
- **Training**  
In addition to the initial training available to adoptive parents, you can also take advantage of training opportunities offered by DCF, VFAFA, the Adoption Consortium, and others throughout the year.

### What’s In It For You

You get to:

- See the positive difference you’ve made in the life of a child.
- Watch a child blossom and grow.
- Help shape a young life.
- Experience the joy of parenting — for the first time, or again if your children are grown.
- Expand and enrich your life.
- Learn and grow as a parent and a person.
- Provide a child with safety, love, and a chance for a new life.

“ALL CHILDREN NEED LOVE AND STABILITY IN THEIR LIVES AND A FAMILY WHO CAN LOVE THEM BACK AND CARE FOR AND PROTECT THEM AND WATCH THEM GROW INTO LOVING ADULTS THEMSELVES. IT HAS ITS UPS AND DOWNS BUT IS WORTH EVERY MINUTE OF IT TO KNOW THAT YOU GAVE YOUR HEART TO SOMEONE WHO NEEDED AND DESERVED IT AND SOMEDAY WILL RETURN THE LOVE AND THANK YOU FOR STICKING IT OUT THROUGH THE UPS AND DOWNS.”

### About Project Family

In 2000, the Vermont Department for Children and Families joined with the Lund Family Center — our state’s largest and oldest nonprofit adoption agency — to create Project Family.

We are dedicated to:

- Finding parents for Vermont children in need.
- Helping parents and children access the support and services they need.

We envision a society in which every child feels safe, cared for, and part of a loving family. One where foster care is understood, embraced, and supported by everyone.

### For More Information

Please contact us if you want more information about adopting a waiting child or to begin the adoption process.

We are here to help!

FACT SHEETS ON RESPITE CARE AND FOSTER CARE ARE ALSO AVAILABLE

1  
PROVIDING  
RESPITE  
CARE

2  
PROVIDING  
FOSTER  
CARE

3  
ADOPTING  
A WAITING  
CHILD